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Psy-Expertise, therapeutic culture and the politics of the personal in development

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Expertise stemming from the psy disciplines is increasingly and explicitly shaping international development policy and practice. Whilst some policy makers see the use of psy expertise as a new way to reduce poverty, increase economic efficiency and promote wellbeing, others raise concerns that psychocentric development promotes individual over structural change, pathologises poverty, and depoliticises development. This paper specifically analyses four aspects of psy knowledge used in contemporary development policy: child development/developmental psychology, behavioural economics, positive psychology, and global mental health. This analysis illuminates the co-constitutive intellectual and colonial histories of development and psy-expertise – a connection that complicates claims that development has been psychologized; the uses and colonality of both within a neoliberal project; and the potential for psychopolitics to inform development.

Key Words: Psy-expertise, child development, behaviouralization, global mental health, therapeutic culture

1. Introduction

Minds, behaviour and psychologies are becoming explicit frontiers in contemporary development policy. While development and psy-expertise share intersecting and co-constitutive histories (discussed shortly), there has been, of late, a contemporary shift to the more explicit mobilisation of psy-expertise within development interventions, and a focus on individual psychology and subjectivity within development policy. This is evident in diverse arenas, such as: the 2015 World Development Report “Mind, Society and Behaviour”, which aims to create economically efficient and effective behaviour in poor people; the promotion of happiness as a policy target; and the emphasis on ‘soft skills’ and positive thinking as a remedy to un- and under employment. The shift also includes behavioural economics, the behaviour change agenda and interventions that ‘nudge’ people to make the ‘right’ economic choices; the burgeoning of

measurement and policy focusing on subjective wellbeing; the universalisation and globalisation of developmental psychological concepts to understand child development; and the inclusion of mental health in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (target 3.4, United Nations, 2015).

Despite the increasingly explicit take up of psy-expertise in development and the mobilization of development in literature on psy-expertise, both remain largely undefined, untheorised and unproblematised by the other. This mutual lack of engagement with critical literature, and with resistance to psy-expertise and development from those who have lived experience of both, risks contributing to the increasing trend of conceptualizing development through psychotherapeutic registers that emphasise individual, psychological, and pharmaceutical, rather than structural, remedies¹. Overlooking structural transformations of development has been critiqued because it conceptualises development as ‘a problem of the mind’: a psychological rather than a structural issue².

The explicit take up of psy-expertise within development means it is timely and significant to take this opportunity for critical interdisciplinary engagement across development and the psy-disciplines, avoiding the often simplistic take up of each by the other, in order not to reproduce the power inequalities and harmful practices of both at a global scale. This marks an important historical moment to influence the way that psy-expertise is taken up, understood and implemented within the development agenda, and how development is conceptualized within the psy-disciplines.

After providing definitions of psy-expertise and its constitutive relationship with development, this paper reviews four distinct yet interrelated areas where the 'psy complex' has come to inform contemporary development policies: child development/developmental psychology; behavioural economics; positive psychology; and global mental health. The paper concludes by highlighting areas of critical concern regarding the use of psy-expertise in development, and considers currently underexplored possibilities for cross-fertilization between the two disciplines.

2. Defining psy- expertise

Psy-expertise (psychotherapy, psychology, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis) signifies a complex of lay and professionalised knowledge that is productive of a psychological self, realised through an ethic of autonomy and self-governance. Psy-expertise categorises social phenomena as

individual traits (attributes, deficiencies, and capacities), often overlooking or masking social and political contexts³. Psychologization⁴, psychiatrization⁵, and therapization⁶ signify the processes by which psy-knowledge becomes dispersed and globalized, making psychological vocabularies widely available for understanding ourselves and others⁷.

Critics have traced the increasingly global flow of psychologising discourses into every day and institutional lives⁸, and the ways that psychological disorders and treatments based on psy-expertise travel across geographical borders⁹. The psychotherapeutic shaping (therapization) of social practices that ‘permeates social policy, public discourses and private life’¹⁰ is part of a pervasive self-help and therapy culture¹¹, or what some have called ‘therapeutic governance’¹². This constitutes a psychocentric worldview that holds the individual as responsible for health and illness, and plays a part in the building of ‘therapeutic nations’¹³. Thus ‘the psy complex has become the most influential field in determining the best or proper way of being human’¹⁴.

It is important to stress that there are different kinds of psy-expertise that a) operate in distinct ways (for example, psychiatrization may lead to prescription of psychopharmaceuticals, whereas ‘soft skills’ training most likely would not); b) contradict and compete with each other for legitimacy (for example, between psychodynamic and cognitive approaches); and c) may not appear explicitly ‘psy’ related (such as emotional fitness, mental toughness, and cognitive science). Furthermore, psychological knowledge and technologies have been allied with many different projects, from torture to libertarian struggles¹⁵. While different kinds of psy-expertise are distinct, they share much in common (e.g. individualization of social problems, psychocentrism, reductionism, decontextualization, and depoliticization). It is these commonalities that we refer to when we use the term psy-expertise throughout this paper.

3. Psy-expertise in development policy and practice

The significance of psy-expertise in development policy and practice can be seen through examining the commonalities between the two disciplines. Specifically, both psy-expertise and development aim to ‘improve’ individuals through the deployment of relations of power. The development intervention as a site where relations of power and knowledge intersect with the lived realities of those ‘being developed’ in the continual process of improvement¹⁶, is a field marked by contestation, oppression and continued maintenance of unequal relations and structures of power¹⁷. In this sense, the development intervention is never neutral; rather, it is a

tool that privileges particular meanings of what ‘improvement’ constitutes over other meanings¹⁸. Psy-expertise is also related to relations of power and improvement, and ‘consistent with the political rationalities of neoliberalism’ it incites, directs, and instructs people to work on themselves (mentality and behaviour) to become self-governing, self-regulating, ‘productive’ citizens¹⁹. Million details this in the context of North America as a settler colony where “human potential psy-techniques melded with human development philosophies to inform a vision for healing as nation building”²⁰, for ‘therapeutic nations’²¹. Here healing from collective and historical trauma comes to be seen as a requirement for self-governance. Thus, psy-expertise is used in development interventions to promote the development of individual subjectivities usually in line with Western modernity²².

4. The psychologization of development, or development and psy-expertise as co-constitutive?

While psy-expertise is being applied in diverse new ways and contexts within international development (what is sometimes referred to as development’s ‘psychic turn’), to speak of the psychologization of development implies this is a new phenomenon. This is problematic because it assumes that development did not draw upon psy-expertise prior to being ‘psychologised’ thus eliding the historically co-constitutive history and symbiotic relationship between development and psy-expertise. Therefore, a longer (and colonial) history must be brought to bear upon analysis of the deep entanglements between development and psy-expertise. This is an approach put forward by Howell in questioning the ‘securitization’ of international relations and health, by tracing the historical relationship between medicine and global politics²³. In order to trace the co-constituted nature of psy-expertise and development a good place to start is their shared colonial history, for as a prelude to the modern development project the formation of particular subjectivities was a major weapon of empire.

While psy-expertise largely developed in Europe (and later in North America), its development as a universalising and biologizing narrative has its origins in the colonial psy-science of the late 19th Century. Thus, ‘the rise of the technologies of psychotherapy in Europe were crucial to the success of the colonial enterprise’²⁴, in part because psychologised explanations for dissent were ‘far preferable [to those in power] to economic and political analyses that might find colonial

practices to be culpable'²⁵. Therefore, 'modern' Western psy disciplines developed through the colonial subjugation and experimentation on the racial 'other'. The use of psy-expertise (specifically psychiatry) as a colonial tool and legacy in many parts of the global South and in current settler colonies is well documented²⁶. Yet while the psy-disciplines were constituted in relation to colonialism, there are also examples of how indigenous knowledge and spirituality have shaped 'western' psychology. For example, Coythis and White trace how Erikson's theories in developmental psychology were shaped by indigenous Lakota philosophy from what is now North America²⁷.

After the World Wars of the first half of the twentieth century, development and its interventions were seen as the tools to deliver modernization for all of the world, in what Tania Li has termed the 'will to improve'²⁸. In his inaugural presidential speech, Truman set out his blueprint for the West's modernising mission for the Global South: the economic and technological advances needed for 'progress' and the development of subjectivities whereby people 'help themselves'²⁹. This was key in focusing modern development on subjectivities as a way to improve the 'other'.

5. Reviewing Psy-Expertise in Contemporary Development Interventions

Today, we see a proliferation of psy-expertise in contemporary development interventions, from the mobilization of psy-expertise within disaster response and humanitarian discourse, and the therapeutics of peace³⁰, to the melding of psy-techniques and human development for nation building³¹. This paper will now critically review four key areas of the mobilization of psy-expertise in development: developmental psychology/child development, behavioural economics, positive psychology and global mental health. These four areas illustrate the diversity of psy-expertise across development, and while they are not exhaustive we argue that intersections of all four underlie much psychological knowledge and practice within development.

5.1. Developmental psychology and child development:

Developmental psychology is about the *becoming* of the individual, and has been critiqued for being more specifically about "...the white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied, liberal individual", rendering "inadequate, deficient or pathological" those who do not or cannot fit normative

developmental models³². In her book *Developments: Child, Image and Nation*, Erica Burman skillfully traces mobilizations of linear developmental logic from child development to economic development³³. It is Burman's argument that psychological development in children cannot be analysed without examining social and economic development as these shape cultural norms about what counts as 'development' in the first place. For example, normative and increasingly globalised child development models prescribe development through standardization, creating a uniform subject for measurement and governance³⁴. Psychological interventions imagine childhood development as a linear path, while cultural, gendered, historical and political realities become external variables against consistent and predictable cognitive functions of the child. An example of this standardization can be found in the work of psychologist Jean Piaget who argued in the 1950s that children 'everywhere' develop according to a particular and defined set of stages, establishing the trajectory of individual cognitive development³⁵. Furthermore, normative US-European formulated scripts of attachment, mother-infant bonding and children's ages and stages of 'normal' development, have been critiqued for naturalising class and cultural privilege³⁶ in the countries from which they originate. Thus, the export of these theories to global South countries, sometimes promoted through development agencies as they call for 'the emulation of a kind of childhood that the West has set as a global standard', raises ethical questions³⁷. This has led many, including anthropologists, such as Scheper-Hughes, to question the validity of applying theories of developmental psychology outside of the cultural and historical contexts in which they were produced because such narrow definitions of childhood exclude the experiences of children around the world³⁸.

Child development/developmental psychology expertise produces a narrative linked not only to the norms within Western psychological expertise but also links this expertise to broader narratives of economic development. The consequence of prescribing a specific trajectory of children's psychological development is that in the process of defining what childhood and development means, developmental psychology creates a benchmark for development actors to 'improve' those falling outside the prescribed development trajectory. Through providing a blueprint to child development this expertise also reinforces the broader project of developmentalism, modernization and improvement of development policy. This links developmental psychology in development policy to the trend of behaviouralization (changing

individual behaviour in line with broader development objectives), exemplified in the upsurge of behavioural economics.

Behavioural Economics and Development Interventions

Behavioural economics has evolved the field of economics, using psychological research to contest the tired neoclassical description of the rational, self-interested, utility maximising, coherent and stable individual³⁹. Differently, behavioural economics constructs individual preferences as changing depending on the beliefs of individuals, time and the environment they are situated within. Behavioural economics has burgeoned more recently with the increased focus by neo-paternalist governments to predict and shape behaviour towards economic efficiency⁴⁰. Neo-paternalism has risen in the neoliberal era increasing the conditionality, surveillance and regulation of those deemed economically inefficient – seen both in welfare policy⁴¹, and within development policy such as the World Bank’s World Development Report 2015. The assumption underpinning this is that poverty is the result of individual irrational and inefficient choices and is in need of behavioural intervention⁴².

Behavioural economics has become an important conduit to encourage responsible, efficient and effective subjectivities⁴³. Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, attributed as the fathers of behavioural economics, have developed a rationale to fit neo-paternalism with neoliberal ideas of non-state intervention. They insist their *libertarian paternalism* is not an oxymoron, as “Libertarian paternalists want to make it easy for people to go their own way”⁴⁴. A central technology of libertarian paternalism is the ‘nudge’. Here, governments and development actors do not ‘enforce’ particular decisions *per se*, instead opting to make some options more attractive and easier to choose from than others (assuming these are decisions that *they would want to make* in the first place)⁴⁵. Policy makers make these assumptions based on normative ideas of development and progress, with economic development as the prevailing normative ideal of modern development⁴⁶.

The World Bank’s 2015 WDR ‘Mind, Society and Behavior’ explicitly aims to use psychological and behavioural expertise to encourage economic development through ‘engineering shifts in social norms’⁴⁷. The WDR promotes liberal paternalism as a mode of poverty reduction through interventions aimed at changing individuals’ habitual agency, social norms and mental models. Nudges are one of the psy-techniques promoted within the WDR to

achieve ‘behavior change without actually changing the set of choices. It does not forbid, penalize, or reward any particular choices. Instead, it points people toward a particular choice by changing the default option, the description, the anchor, or the reference point’⁴⁸.

Here behavioural techniques are used without changing the opportunities available to people. Specifically, the WDR describes poor people’s choices as economically suboptimal and as a major site for improvement. For example, the report states that “lack of self-control is a leading explanation for lack of savings”⁴⁹. By asserting that improvements could be made to help poor people make better decisions, the report assumes that poverty has a particular behavioural element to it and that this should be the site of intervention. By focusing on improving individuals’ choices and decision making, the use of behavioural economics in development policy disregards the structural exploitation and oppression underpinning the development industry more broadly. Furthermore, similar concerns of the hyper individualization and decontextualization of poverty within behaviouralization can be seen in the rise of positive psychology, as both share histories of development from psychological experiments on conditioning and learned helplessness.

5.2. Positive psychology, subjective wellbeing and development

The last 20 years has seen an ‘explosion’ of interest within economics and international development into subjective measures of wellbeing and quality of life⁵⁰, alongside an increasing focus on the relationship between poverty and subjective wellbeing⁵¹, and into the ways that income dynamics impact upon subjective states⁵². Much of this work links to growing recognition of the multidimensional nature of poverty - that the lived reality of poverty involves intersecting inequalities and deprivations, meaning that there is more to poverty than income alone⁵³.

Happiness has become a central concept within the personal and subjective wellbeing agenda. Concerns with the measurement of happiness and its promotion as a policy target draw upon the work of Positive Psychology⁵⁴. The movement for Positive Psychology emerged in the USA in the mid-1990s, coming to prominence from the early 2000s onwards. Positive psychology constructs itself in contrast to mainstream or traditional psychological models, which have

tended to emphasise negative attributes, such as disorder and illness. In contrast, positive psychology focuses on positive psychological attributes, such as happiness, optimism, and resilience and how these attributes can be learned. This emphasis on learned optimism and happiness is a direct descendant of ‘learned helplessness’⁵⁵. Based on experiments in the 1960s that found that dogs failed to learn avoidance strategies after being exposed to repeated electric shocks, Martin Seligman (credited as being the founder of Positive Psychology) and his colleagues put forward the concept of ‘learned helplessness’ (seen to develop in relation to perceived powerlessness)⁵⁶. Extrapolating this to humans, we can see that learned optimism is formulated as a remedy for learned helplessness⁵⁷.

While there is some recognition of socio-economic factors within Positive Psychology, there is a strong ‘undertow of individualism’⁵⁸, and little account given of structural barriers, such as discrimination or poverty⁵⁹. Much of this links to work into the economics of happiness, with Easterlin’s famous claim that beyond a certain threshold, wealth doesn’t correlate with happiness⁶⁰. There has been well-founded concern that the growing use of subjective measures within research into poverty and wellbeing may, if allowed to ‘float free from other dimensions...validate a withdrawal of material support’ because, for example, poor people may rate their subjective experience of happiness just as high as richer people⁶¹. Ultimately subjective wellbeing positions people as consumers, who are seen as able to rate their life satisfaction, although there have been some empirical attempts to move away from this narrow framing of wellbeing⁶².

Positioning itself against the over-diagnosis and over-prescription of psychological therapies and psychopharmaceuticals, positive psychology appears at first to provide an alternative to psychologization. Yet on closer examination it actually ‘extends the domains of authority of psychology, rather than reining them in: psychology now claims dominion not only over our depression, but over our optimism too’⁶³. Furthermore, positive psychology is increasingly used to inform development interventions, for example, the framing of happiness as a ‘new development paradigm’ within Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness Index⁶⁴; and the United Nations happiness resolution, which sees the pursuit of happiness as a fundamental human goal⁶⁵.

The use of Positive Psychology is also promoted in the World Development Report *Mind, Society and Behaviour*, which cites an example of inspirational films being used to tackle the ‘fatalistic’ and ‘low’ aspirations of people in Ethiopia. The films showed how ‘inspiring’ Ethiopians improved their socio-economic positions through goal setting, careful choice-making and perseverance⁶⁶. The literature also points to the uses of positive psychology to inform interventions into poverty⁶⁷. Positive Psychology as a governmental project linked to poverty has a history dating back to Seligman’s early work. Learned helplessness was a key concept in the USA’s ‘War on Poverty’ from the 1960s onwards, used to explain poverty as being the result of poor people’s (and particularly poor urban African-Americans) psychological attributes of ‘helplessness’ and ‘low self-esteem’ and not because of structural racism and inequality⁶⁸. In this context psy-expertise and developmental approaches are invoked to ‘manage’ and individualize legacies of enslavement in North American settler colonialism. Learned helplessness also informed the development of torture techniques within the George W. Bush-era War on Terror⁶⁹, and Seligman is now the main architect of the US Army’s resilience programme, where positive psychology is being employed to enable soldiers to ‘grow psychologically from the crucible of combat’⁷⁰. In the UK, the explicit use of psy-expertise informed by positive psychology is a key part of current neo-conservative governance and austerity measures, evident for example in the promotion of positive thinking and mental toughness in workfare programmes, and with the increasing employment of cognitive behavioural therapists in job centres⁷¹.

Ultimately, then, a central critique of the use of positive psychology within development and governmental projects is that it enables poverty to be explained away as a ‘problem’ of learned behaviour, cultural beliefs and inefficient decisions⁷², and focuses on changing individual mentalities while largely overlooking structural change. This is a critique that has also been levelled at advocacy situating mental health as a development priority.

5.3. *Global mental health and development*

A key mechanism for the mobilization of psy-expertise within development has been through sustained advocacy to embed mental health within development policy and practice. The concern that mental health is both absent within development agendas and an ‘obstacle’ to the

achievement of development goals lies at the heart of attempts to ‘Mainstream mental health interventions into health, poverty reduction, development policies, strategies and interventions’⁷³, and to scale up access to mental health services in low and middle-income countries⁷⁴. The exclusion of mental health within development was seen as constituting ‘a significant impediment to the achievement of national and international development goals’⁷⁵, leading mental health to be named ‘one of the most pressing development issues of our time’⁷⁶. These advocacy efforts make clear that:

‘progress in development will not be made without improvements in mental health...Improving mental health is therefore a vital part of a successful development programme’⁷⁷.

Sustained advocacy from the Movement for Global Mental Health has resulted in the inclusion of mental health within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (target 3.4). A core component of advocacy to mainstream mental health interventions within development is the positive association between poverty and poor mental health – the mental health-poverty nexus. Here mental health problems are perceived as ‘a brake on development as they cause (and are caused by) poverty’⁷⁸.

This association has been central in drawing attention to the global prevalence of mental disorders and specifically the huge ‘burden’ they are said to create in low and middle income countries⁷⁹. Here poor mental health is conceptualized as directly and indirectly impeding the capacity to work productively and as detrimental to the economy. Thus, the high cost of mental disorder, calculated through lost productivity due to illness, is compared to the relatively cheap cost of treatment⁸⁰, and to advocate for global access to psycho-pharmaceuticals and global dissemination of psychological therapies⁸¹ (a logic evident in international mental health programmes, such as, the WHO MIND (Mental Health in International Development) and the UK DfID MhaPP (Mental Health and Poverty Project)⁸². In this way, psychological intervention is pitched as a solution to poverty by breaking the ‘vicious cycle’ between poverty and ‘mental illness’. Some have even suggested that poverty alleviation efforts (usually aimed at the individual or familial level, such as microfinance) are less effective than mental health services in breaking this ‘cycle’⁸³.

Advocacy that draws attention to the neglect of mental health within development is laudable, particularly as it can help to mobilise political will and resources. Yet a number of critiques have been levied at the assumption that mental health is a ‘problem’ for development and development is a ‘solution’ for mental health. The explicit positioning of mental health within development often occurs through a psychocentric register that pushes clinical, therapeutic and pharmaceutical approaches. This approach diverts attention from structural contributors to distress, the politics of psy-expertise, and the potentially detrimental effects of some development initiatives on psychological wellbeing⁸⁴. In this way, development is increasingly being understood as ‘a problem of the mind’: a psychological rather than a structural issue⁸⁵.

The implications of framing socio-economic issues as psychological ‘problems’ within development is evident in governmental and global mental health advocacy responses to farmer suicides in India.

Between 1997-2010 there were over 200,000 farmer suicides in India⁸⁶, and there are estimates of 300,000 deaths due to self-poisoning with pesticides a year in the Asia-Pacific region⁸⁷. Research has found that 87% of farmer suicides in India are linked to indebtedness due to the aggressive promotion of agribusiness, the effect of genetically modified seeds on market prices, and increased vulnerability of farmers to crop failure or to price fluctuation of crops in the world market⁸⁸. Despite some recognition of the political economy within which these suicides are embedded, psychological research focus has centred on individual factors and the socio-behavioural practices of farmers, failing to acknowledge the role of wider agrarian crisis, and how farmers’ precariousness within volatile economic markets contributes to suicide rates⁸⁹. The psychology of farmers has also been the site of much Government intervention and relief efforts, with some States making psychological therapy available and others sending out teams of psychiatrists⁹⁰. Similarly, global mental health advocates, while acknowledging the harm caused by unrestrained economic reforms⁹¹, have put forward interventions drawing heavily on psy-expertise, such as improving treatment for depression and increasing access to anti-depressants⁹². The dominant assumption at work here is that ‘mental disorder’ is a contributor to suicide, and that suicide is ‘individualized, “internalized”, pathologised, [and] depoliticized’⁹³. This makes possible interventions based on psychological and pharmaceutical logics and leaves the economistic rationale underlying agricultural and economic reforms uninterrogated⁹⁴.

Further questions have been raised about the move to scale up mental health services globally and about the framing of mental health as a global priority. Too numerous to discuss at length here these arguments have, in summary: raised questions about the ethics and validity of US-European mental health diagnoses being exported to countries of the global South, and the much disputed and controversial evidence base on which this is founded⁹⁵; the colonial legacy and continued coloniality of psychiatry in many global South countries and settler colonies⁹⁶; the potentially deleterious effects of prioritising ‘modern’ and ‘western’ mental health care over locally valid, traditional or indigenous systems of healing⁹⁷; and called to attention the WHO’s own findings that recovery outcomes for Schizophrenia were found to be better in some ‘developing’ compared to ‘developed’ countries⁹⁸.

6. Thinking critically about psy-expertise in development

This paper has traced the ways that development and psy-expertise have grown together and co-constituted each other. It has reviewed four areas where psy-expertise explicitly shapes development practice (child development, behavioural economics, positive psychology, and global mental health). This analysis has illuminated two main threads that intersect with all four areas (and to which this paper will now turn): psy-expertise and neoliberal governmentality, and coloniality.

6.1. *Neoliberal logic and hyper-individualization*

Neo-liberalism furthers liberalism’s tendency to manufacture the spheres of the market, civil society and the individual. Where classical liberalism imposed limits on government’s control over markets, neoliberalism reconfigured the complete exercise of political power to that of the logic of markets⁹⁹. Therefore, alternative discourses are silenced, as development policy making is reduced to that of the economic realm. Whilst scholars understand and use the term neoliberalism in various ways¹⁰⁰, we understand neoliberalism as a form of governmentality based on the economization of life where social complexity is reduced to economic logic¹⁰¹. The economization of social life has implications for the individual who is required to be literally their own business¹⁰²; the rational, self-sufficient, economic actor affectionately called *homo economicus*¹⁰³. The individual and her subjectivity are expected to operate in line with market logic where responsible behaviour is defined as not just self-regulation but as economically efficient and effective¹⁰⁴. Neoliberal subjectivity thus becomes a way in which the self is known in relation to market logic.

This hyper individualization and economization has implications when thinking about the uptake of psy-expertise in development interventions because psy-expertise (through inciting self-governance) is ‘consistent with the political rationalities of neoliberalism’¹⁰⁵. Thus, according to Philip Rieff the rise of ‘psychological man’ came to characterise the ideal of western liberal democracy. Nikolas Rose has traced how from the 20th Century onwards ‘our ideas of ourselves, identity, autonomy, freedom, and self-fulfilment’ have been ‘reshaped in psychological terms’¹⁰⁶. Rose links the uptake of the psy-disciplines in diverse arenas to shifts in the exercise of political power that stress choice and personal responsibility, and thus are compatible and perhaps a core factor of neoliberal governance. Yet alongside this psychological reshaping is an increasingly neurological reshaping¹⁰⁷, likely to shape development discourse in the years to come.

The acute focus on the individual and the de-politicization of social life through economization leads to the belief that poverty is attributable to individuals’ choices. The remedy within neoliberal and psychocentric¹⁰⁸ logic lies in changing individuals and not structures¹⁰⁹. For Schram, this “economistic-therapeutic-managerial” discourse “imputes to the poor the identity of self-interested, utility-maximizing individuals who need to be given the right incentives so that they will change their behaviour and enable the state to better manage the problems of poverty and welfare dependency. This discourse concentrates almost exclusively on disembodied information on individual behaviour as the primary way to isolate the causes of poverty and develop solutions”¹¹⁰. The problematizing of psyches and behaviour forecloses analysis that includes agency as resistance and subversion to economic development policies¹¹¹. Moreover, this economization and individualization of poverty and underdevelopment obscures broader relations of power and coloniality within the global economy and within both the development and psy industries themselves.

6.2. Coloniality and the globalization of psy-expertise

Coloniality survives colonialism through the continuity of long-standing patterns of power that define culture, labour, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production¹¹². Coloniality then is an ongoing process of ordering relations that promotes a specific mode of being – one that projects the inferiority of subjectivities not subscribing to white liberal norms¹¹³. Like formal colonization, coloniality colonises ‘minds in addition to bodies’¹¹⁴, encouraging specific forms of psychic life, in what has been called the “psychic life of colonial power”¹¹⁵. During formal

colonization this form of psychic life was (and continues to be in settler colonies) dehumanizing and objectifying because the colonized were cast either as instruments of production (even as the colonizer imposed onto them western accounts of subject formation) or as non-persons that needed to be erased¹¹⁶. Today, with the globalization of psy-expertise, ever growing populations are codified through psychological vocabularies as in need of ‘improvement’. Individualized and reductionist models that are culturally and historically contingent to the global North are being applied globally, under the assumption that children and countries undergo the same developmental stages all over the world; that there can be global norms for the treatment of distress; and that certain behaviours and ways of being (including self-governance) are universally normative and desirable.

Thus development interventions act as a site for the globalisation of psy-expertise, while also having been historically shaped by psy-expertise. Yet there is a difference in how the ‘self’ is conceptualised by people around the world, and much of Western psy-expertise stems from just one conceptualization; the liberal Western individual. Much of the Euro/American psy paradigm tends to universalise theories from studies and concepts arising from liberal Western research¹¹⁷ without considering epistemological differences in explanatory models and worldviews globally. Coloniality is promoted through the assumption of universal applicability of Western constructs. There needs to be an understanding that concepts being tested are outside the epistemological and political environment they were intended¹¹⁸. This requires going further than just being open to the concept’s relevance at differing degrees depending on ‘culture’¹¹⁹. It requires examining the meaning of the psychological or self in people’s lives, as well as other relevant concepts, through non-reductive frameworks that are located in pertinent social, historical and cultural contexts¹²⁰.

Exploring alternative psychologies is not just an important epistemological exercise but also an important ontological exercise that challenges the conception of being in itself. Both epistemological and ontological questions of psy-expertise challenge its use in global mental health, behaviouralization, positive psychology and child development, which tend instead to promote universal standards that make little room for different explanatory models, ways of being and worldviews.

7. Is there a place for psy-expertise in development?

Resistance to the destruction of epistemological diversity is evident in the critical ‘post’ movements of both the psy-disciplines and development. There is resistance worldwide to the dominance of psy-expertise from a diverse and international psychiatric user and survivor movement and from critical professionals. This is evident in the project of post-psychiatry that aims to think “beyond the current technological paradigm” in order to engage more meaningfully with the user/survivor movement¹²¹, and to search for more ethical and sustainable ways to respond to distress¹²². This project has parallels to ‘post-development’ thinking within international development that seeks to open up a discursive space to alternatives and transform the ‘political economy of truth’ about development¹²³. That there should be similar movements that resist psy-expertise and development is perhaps not surprising when we consider that both psy-technologies and the technocratic and economic logic of development are often dis-embedded from lived realities and from a pluralism of locally available resources¹²⁴. It thus, seems fruitful to connect and enable dialogue between localised and globalised forms of resistance to psy-expertise with movements of resistance to development.

The questions raised in this paper focused on the current uptake of psy-expertise as a remedy to the psychological impact of social harms within development. The four distinct and yet interrelated cases presented provide an extrapolation of the diverse and contradictory trajectories and impacts of psy-expertise within international development. For example, the interventions discussed ranged from behaviour change or shifts in social norms, to psychological counselling, to scaling up access to psycho-pharmaceuticals. This illustrates that psy-expertise is diverse, that it produces interventions that may be complementary or may compete with one another, and is commensurate with multiple different projects and relations of power (from child development to torture techniques, and from war to peace). Yet the commonality in these different mobilizations of psy-expertise is a psychocentric logic that reconfigures social issues (poverty, inequality and ‘under’ development) as individual attributes (both in terms of deficiencies and qualities).

This psychocentric reconfiguring is not ‘new’, for in tracing the co-constituted colonial histories and continued coloniality of psy-expertise and development interventions we have seen how resistance to colonialism was (and continues to be in some settler colonies) reconfigured as

madness, and a focus on the psychology of colonised peoples was/is seen as a way to divert attention from colonial (and neoliberal) culpability and violence¹²⁵. Set in resistance to this approach, the anti-colonial work of Frantz Fanon's sociodiagnostics explored the psychopathology of colonialism itself, reframing individual 'symptoms' of distress as 'symptoms' of colonialism¹²⁶. This is a psychopolitics that connects private troubles to social problems¹²⁷, and involves a constant shifting between psychological and political registers¹²⁸, never dissolving the two or abandoning one register in favour of the other¹²⁹. In an opposite move to framing development as a 'problem of the mind'¹³⁰, psychopolitics opens a possibility to explore the psychological impact and psychic life of development interventions (the subjectivities made possible, and the resistance mobilized)¹³¹, while moving away from psychocentric developmental logic, policy and practice.

This paper evidences the need for empirical work to explore the specific ways that psy-expertise (and increasingly neuro-expertise) and development are taken up, appropriated, or resisted within diverse local contexts, globally. It advocates doing this while taking seriously the co-constitutive connection between the intellectual and colonial histories of psy-knowledge and development that complicate claims that development has been psychologized.

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